



Literature as a Tool of Epistemology: Medieval Perspectives for Post-Modernity Or, the Post-Modern World Long Anticipated by the Pre-Modern: Boethius's *De consolation philosophiae*, *Apollonius of Tyre*, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius

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Abstract

Post-modernity is characterized by a dangerous condition since the twenty-first century, with basic freedoms at stake, with racism on the rise, with political turmoil and profound dissatisfaction suffered by the individual being increasingly common phenomena. Moreover, our world has entered the Anthropocene, which puts human existence here on this earth at risk. One of the reasons why post-modernism reflects a sense of chaos, loss of identity, and absence of ethical, moral, and spiritual principles and guidance appears to be the regular efforts to jettison everything from the past and to rely only on what the internet provides us with. To combat this wrong notion, we only need to keep the metaphor of the tree in mind which exists only because the roots and the canopy cooperate in full symbiosis. This study examines several fundamental texts from the Middle Ages that have proven to be relevant for all people and for all times. Those literary, didactic, and philosophical works continue to speak to us today and might be more important for the present generation than ever before, adding significant messages about human life even under present conditions. *Apollonius of Tyre* illustrates the disastrous but also healing impact of misfortune on individuals. The fables by Marie de France and Ulrich Bonerius address universal concerns of ethical, moral, and political nature. Most important, however, the late antique philosopher Boethius offered the most trenchant messages about the true nature of happiness far beyond the dimension of fortune/contingency, and so his teachings continue to address the fundamentals of human existence. As old all those voices certainly are, they prove to be highly topical particularly in the post-modern world.

Keywords: Post-modernity, Medieval Philosophy, Medieval Literature, Medieval Religion, Happiness, Fortune, *Apollonius of Tyre*, Marie De France, Ulrich Bonerius (Boner), Boethius.

The Pre-Modern as the Foundation of the Post-Modern

It is a natural and universal phenomenon that people always tend to look forward, mostly in anticipation or hope that life will get better for them. This might be even more the case in the current situation, in the twenty-first century, with the availability of the internet, the computer technology, and many other related applications and instruments constantly changing, developing further, taking most people along in a whirlwind of the paradigm shift we find ourselves situated in right now, and this probably more than ever before (Classen, ed., *Paradigm Shifts*). But there are also worries that while we move forward we might end up in a dystopia. Past, present, and the future always need to be balanced out well, and this applies also to the issue we are concerned with here, the post-modern discourse about human existence in literary terms viewed from a pre-modern perspective.

The present project pertains to the phenomenon of post-modernity, but only indirectly, specifically pursuing the question of how we as individuals fit into this new stage of life by way of embracing the past as much as the current situation and the future. Do we really only look forward, or do we not also draw from our historical resources in everything we do as human beings? What does the past mean within the context of the post-modern (Mondschein; Murdoch) when we question the role of the Humanities in the current academic context (Willard)? There are many possible ways to approach the concept of post-modernity, and to do justice to this huge theoretical model would take up the entire space of this article without getting to its essential point. Hence, at the risk of oversimplification, let us assume that we all have a general notion of what post-modernity means because we live right within this new period and are required to accept the current challenges as they determine our lives. But, to lay the foundation for the subsequent investigation, a few keywords or references must suffice to sketch in general what we would imply regarding post-modernity (Basu Thakur, 2016).

Many socially marginalized groups have greatly gained in significance, and while the struggle for women's equality continues unabatedly, new efforts have emerged that force us, rightly so, to fight against racism, colonialism, post-capitalism, ageism, imperialism, sexism, and many other traditional strategies to maintain a hegemonic power structure especially in the West. In the Humanities, those aspects matter critically, but they are not only germane to our present time. In other words, these issues are not simply relevant within the arena of politics, economics, and social and medical fields; instead, they pertain very much to all of our everyday lives and force us, when critically viewed, to address them head-on, also as scholars in literature, linguistics, languages, the visual arts, and/or history drawing from an ever-expanding repository of narratives and visual documents. *Hic Rhodos, hic salta!*

However, we must also be careful not to accept the current issues troubling our society as the all-consuming and exclusive topics relevant for us throughout time. The topics of today are very important, of course, but we should not ignore the universal concerns as they pertain to us as human beings beyond the material, political, economic, and other conditions irrespective of the specific time limits. As esoteric and hence useless older literature or medieval history seem to be for many scientists and politicians, as powerful they prove to be as the soil from which the plants in the post-modern world arise and thrive, both negatively and positively (Willard). Umberto Eco deserves particular credit for the coinage of the phrase "chaosmos," the blending of medieval epistemology with post-modern aesthetics and critical theory (Farronato; see also the contributions to Nicol, ed.).

As Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema now formulate,

In contrast to dazzling technological innovations, the outcome of successful education in the disciplines that form the Humanities and the Social Sciences will contribute primarily to upholding, and perhaps even improving, a political system that is worth living in (something that many western politicians benefit from but seem to take for granted). There are, in addition, further beneficial insights that critical engagement with medieval subjects can entail once they are brought into a comparative perspective with contemporary phenomena, and these doubtless merit further attention (p. 23).

To avoid the danger of anachronism, let us not defer to a highfalutin and abstract discourse aimed at the establishment of intellectual and social freedom, for instance, and at a spurious assumption of equality among all people which has probably never existed throughout world history. Certainly, this might be an ideal, but realistically speaking, probably not one that would be ever achievable. Neither the pre- nor the post-modern world was totally engrossed with the idea of freedom, as much as it constitutes one of the cornerstones of western societies. Although there is a growing number of countries in this world determined by

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democracy, this does not represent a guarantee for freedom at all, since we must not confuse it with complete individualism and independence (Neo-Liberalism).

Both in the Middle Ages and today, people have lived within a social context, which has always come with privileges and obligations, law and order, rules and regulations, and yet also free will and free actions to some extent. Without understanding how the modern political system emerged, we would not be prepared to defend it against the constant onslaught by the countless bitter opponents greedily aiming at taking over control of resources and depriving the people of their fundamental rights and privileges, and this also in the United States, the birthplace of democracy. Post-modern political developments thus have to be viewed through the lens of historical developments, which take us directly back to the Middle Ages when the early modern nation state emerged gradually, with Iceland, Frisia, Bohemia, and Switzerland having been the forerunners of modern democracy (Fried).

Unfortunately, post-modernity also means that we live in a world in which the survival of the human race is no longer completely secured (Göpel, 2019; André, 2020; for the very opposite perspective, see McAfee, 2017; McAfee, 2019). Without being Marxist or Socialist, it is absolutely clear that the current global situation, if not crisis, has deeply and invariably led to a critical mass that forces us all as a collective to cope with a new material reality, as dire as this might be, protecting ourselves from the consequences of an uncontrolled and selfish capitalism devastating for the lives of billions of people all over the world. Ecocritical issues have also grown in importance to a level at which we seem to have already reached the point of no return, with all of us living in the Anthropocene, the last stage of our earth during which we as people have begun to impact our natural environment so negatively that our own survival might be at stake (Schmidt, 2018; Münster, 2020). We could also claim that post-modernity is determined by the move away from traditional capitalistic economy and industrial production to a service- and finance-based business models. At the same time, and closely connected with all this, we observe the slow but steady disappearance of the two traditional super-powers, the United States and the USSR (now, Russia), both being replaced by the Asian countries, especially China, Japan, South-Korea, etc., while the European Union experiences its rebirth or manages to maintain its leading role on a global level.

The analogy would be the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire into a nominal empire with most local princes running their own territories fairly independently. Political structures are thus the result of constantly ongoing historical developments, and we can get a solid grasp of the current conditions only if we understand past phenomena in that regard. Post-modernity, however, might also be the result of new approaches to gender, which today is much more recognized as form of self-determination and social construction, even by means of physical-medical interventions (Zima; Beville). We face, in other words, a new mode of self-identity within a rapidly changing world which reflects much more deeply than in the past the dimensions of discursive strategies in that process.

Considering that only the twelfth century really discovered the phenomenon of love and hence the intriguing, tense, powerful, but also difficult and dangerous relationship between the two genders – homosexuality was an anathema to an extreme, and this well until the late twentieth century – we grasp yet another important shared notion building bridges between the pre- and the post-modern era (Lewis; Fajardo-Acosta).

Undoubtedly, the great interest in understanding the meaning of post-modernity makes good sense because we all want to know who we are, where we are, where we are heading, and why we are here. This is the ultimate purpose of all intellectual endeavors, whether in philosophy or in music, whether in anthropology or in physics, whether in the fine arts or in the humanities. Ironically, however, the past has not simply faded away in the dust of history, and my question here focuses on the intertwining of past and present within a

quickly transforming political, environmental, social, political, and economic framework (Classen, “The Amazon Rainforest”).

How does the pre-modern world interact with the post-modern world? Have we already jettisoned the Middle Ages and subsequent periods in favor of an entirely presentist viewpoint? Are we satisfied today with an exclusive focus on technology and capitalist concepts, or are we still determined by philosophical, ethical, moral, religious, or aesthetic principles as they had emerged in antiquity and the pre-modern world? If the latter is the case, which would not need an extensive explanation, then we can immediately recognize the highly complex structure of human culture and identity. The more we move forward in technological, scientific, or medical terms, the more we must reaffirm our historical foundation from which all our value systems and life concepts have emerged. To be sure, whatever criteria we rely on to characterize our own age today, we experience a profound paradigm shift which lays bare the constructiveness of our culture, and hence also its historical foundation.

Naturally, the current generation is trying very hard to push forward, and this is, indeed, one of its essential tasks, as it has always been the case. However, humans are historical beings, like trees and other plants, with roots deeply anchored in the soil, while the trunk, the branches, and the leaves reach out to the top. Past and present are thus interlocking, both in need of each other. As much as the present time requires present answers, as much do people also draw from past experiences in order to prepare themselves for the future because the paradigm shift leaves us straggling in a time of great uncertainties.

This truism is the foundation for all schooling because a young person must first learn the basis before s/he can move forward in the exploration of the world. In the medieval educational system, for instance, the student first acquired knowledge of the *trivium* (rhetoric, logic, and grammar), and only then turned to the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music; cf., e.g., the contributions to Wagner, ed.). Moreover, struggles for justice, tolerance, gender equality, or respect for social minorities today are not the result of post-modern conditions. They grew from historical conditions, and their ideals were also developed already in the past, which convinces us to accept that the pre-modern constitutes the source from which the post-modern evolved (Classen, *Toleration*).

Of course, our post-modern world faces huge challenges in terms of technology, environmental conditions, medicine, energy, communication, and food supplies, and those issues require the best minds to handle them in a creative and a productive way. The best minds, however, are not simply geniuses and technocrats, but those who have acquired a deep education and are sensitive to larger cultural conditions, preferably on a global level. A Humanities approach to ecological, medical, or foodstuff issues thus proves to be more critical than many people might have imagined because we are, as a species, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and in deep need of ethics and morality, all of which must be acquired through a continuous and complex process of learning.

What I suggest here is hence not to preach to the choir, or to oppose post-modernity even though we already exist within the post-modern period, but to build bridges between past and present in order to offer literary-cultural avenues for the current generation to draw from the most valuable experiences in the past with the goal of developing the necessary tools to move into our future (*Relevance of the Humanities*). With respect to world poverty and hunger, for instance, we need a “new concept of community to emerge, one that is based on a rethinking of the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, on a dismantling of conventional hierarchies and privilege; in short, on an ethos of hospitality and generosity” (Topping, p. 24). We operate by means of a “mindwork,” and the current, post-modern challenges find resources in the storehouse of the pre-modern culture.

We could go so far and claim, along with Astin, “that the absence of ‘mindwork’ is at the root of many domestic and world problems. By implication, therefore, ‘mindwork’ has the capacity to prompt activism and create social change. Why this potential is not realised,

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however, is because, ‘while we are justifiably proud of our “outer” developments in fields such as science, medicine, technology, and commerce, we have increasingly come to neglect our ‘inner’ development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality and self-understanding” (Astin, pp. vii-viii).

The only point that needs to be added to this observation is that this mindwork derives much of its power and inspiration from pre-modern or early-modern literature, philosophy, or religion. As Topping emphasizes, “This, I argue, is the space of ‘mindwork’, where unconscious responses to human tragedy become conscious conundrums in search of different, lasting solutions. It is also the space in which we find ourselves when confronted with the frequent moments of epistemological uncertainty, of sensory disorientation or deprivation, of a defamiliarized reality, of implied confrontation with our own fragility, of self-implication in the experience of those who have suffered a tragic loss of social status” (Topping, p. 18).

We need to consider several premises for our critical arguments here. Each one of those could be discussed at length, and yet they would probably run into many challenges all by themselves. Let us simply state that literature, the arts, philosophy, the study of religion, communication, history, anthropology, sociology, political sciences, etc. all carry intrinsic values and contribute in an essential way to the growth of our society also in material and technical terms. This brings many different players from different time periods to the same table, and it would not be possible to understand post-modern literature without its grounding in the pre-modern world (McHale and Platt, ed., 2016). The omnipresence of libraries, public and private, throughout the world, underscores this phenomenon as much as the existence of schools, religious and spiritual centers, galleries, and museums. While prior to ca. 1800 the study of the classics and rhetoric mattered centrally, the rise of modern nationalism, nationhood, and politicized cultural identity also introduced the humanities as a fundamental discipline at the modern university, basically established by Wilhelm von Humboldt in Berlin (e.g., Mathäs; Östling).

Granted, the humanities are no longer completely firmly accepted in the public, and face increasingly severe challenges all over the world. One of the significant reasons could be, as I would suggest, the fallout of post-modernity and its critical loss or deliberate dismissal of unifying, universal, and timeless values and ideals, meaning that we are losing the consensus on the foundation of culture (Mondschein) and its specific relevance for individual or global purposes. The current paradigm shift has destabilized many traditional concepts and frameworks and undermines the relevance of numerous academic disciplines, which has been discussed already by influential scholars (e.g., Nussbaum), whether rightly or wrongly cannot be fully determined here. However, despite strongly opposing worldviews, a careful analysis of what truly matters for all people within a society would reveal, as Haidt has argued from a psychological point of view, that we all rely on values and ideals, that is, ethics, morality, a sense of justice and fairness. Our differences tend to result from different emphases, but not from a disagreement about those foundational aspects and universal needs (Haidt, 2013).

One major problem appears to be that the ever-growing tendency to look only toward the future, driven by the ongoing robotization and digitization of our current world, increasingly removes the critical foundation for our existence today, the past, the collective memory and experience expressed in a vast storehouse of literary, religious, philosophical texts containing the essential experiences, ideals, virtues, and warnings about vices.

Curiously, the very recent German science fiction thriller web television series, *Dark*, co-created by Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese, which ran in three series from 2017 to 2020, reminds us once again that neither the past nor the present, and certainly not the future, can exist without each other because they coexist in an intricate and intertwining network and

constitute the fundamental elements of a perhaps infinite matrix ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_(TV_series)); <https://dark.netflix.io/en>; <https://www.netflix.com/title/80100172>; both accessed on 16th Nov, 2020). We are, after all, historical beings, and ignoring any aspect from the past endangers certain aspects in the future as well which might never develop because of a missing link. This is also expressed most powerfully in the novel for young readers, *Momo* (1973), by the famous author Michael Ende, where we are confronted with the unsettling question regarding the ultimate nature of time and how we as human beings fit into it, or depend on it for our own existence.

These and many other issues have already been addressed by a variety of scholars, and I myself have examined them from many different perspectives as well (most recently, Classen, “The Human Quest”). What I would like to add here is the contribution of the Middle Ages to the discourse of post-modernity, as paradoxical as this might sound at first. The more we move forward, driven by technology, above all, the more we need to ensure a strong anchoring in the past when the storehouse of our experiences, values, ideals, and concepts was created in the first place. While post-modern struggles aim, for instance, at dismantling racism, colonialism, gender inequality, etc., which consumes much of our present energy and attention, we need also to look backwards and to remind ourselves constantly of what we ought to remember in order to maintain or to establish a harmonious existence with ourselves, our social community, and the natural environment.

At the risk of preaching to the converted, we must always keep in mind that economic or medical operations require historical grounding; that technological transformations remain meaningless if the individual using the latest computer software does not know why s/he exists and/or for what purposes. We certainly have to address such global issues as migration, refugees, poverty, famine, military conflicts, and global warming. But if we do not explore or develop a clear sense of the ultimate purpose of our existence, then those political or economic responses would only address the material dimension. As human beings, however, we must look backwards in order to move forwards, and we must be able to grow inside while we grow outside. The examination of a few medieval contributions to this universal quest will allow us to gain deeper insight into this fundamental concept. As most philosophers and poets throughout time have already confirmed, neither money nor power create individual happiness, and the quest for meaning remains elusive if it is not anchored in a deep sense of identity, culture, and history (Kernbach and Eppler, 2020). The post-modern world might be further away from this goal than ever before, and this is the reason why a medievalist approach to the current malaise promises to infuse new energy, inspiration, and motivation into the current discourse.

The Past Speaks To US in the Post-Modern World Critical Issues for the Human Existence

Next, I intend to discuss one philosophical text (Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, ca. 524), one late antique novel (*Apollonius of Tyre*, first ca. 3rd century C.E.), and the works of two different fable authors (Marie de France, fl. ca. 1170-1200; Ulrich Bonerius, fl. ca. 1220-1250). All of their insights and observations allow us today, in the post-modern era, to revisit our own position as people and to re-establish ourselves within the time-space continuum. While the first, Boethius, indicated clearly how and where the individual could achieve true happiness, the second, *Apollonius*, outlined the way how the individual would have to balance destiny and love. Finally, the two fable authors, Marie and Bonerius addressed a wide range of topics from ethical and moral perspectives that continue to matter for us today as well. I would not claim, far from it, that our study of those texts would be the precondition for a successful life today. There are just too many alternatives from the same pre-modern world. However, these four examples underscore in highly dramatic terms why past voices at large could be considered keys for our future. The rich research literature dedicated to the close analysis of those works indicates their timeless value, a value which proves to be so

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relevant also in post-modernity which seems to be more characterized by global deconstruction and iconoclasm than construction and the creation of values.

Consolation of Philosophy: The Search for Happiness

Subsequently, I can only proceed in a somewhat essayistic fashion because each case represents an entire world by itself. Nevertheless, and this might be a significant advantage particularly of post-modernity, since we have learned to accept the wide range of voices within an ever-expanding discourse, the medieval contributions will allow us to regain a sense of the basis of human existence, even under the current conditions, with ever more crises arising on the horizon (Marenbon; Marenbon, ed.).

In his treatise, *De consolatio philosophiae* (ca. 524), Boethius offered one of the most influential philosophical treatises on the question of what constitutes human happiness (Boethius). He composed his text shortly before his own execution which resulted from trumped-up charges against him of alleged state treason. In an allegorical dialogue, Philosophy (Philosophia) arrives in his prison cell and engages deeply with Boethius about the true meaning of life, which is here defined as the quest for happiness. Philosophy at first reminds Boethius of the false sense of happiness most people are subject to, dismissing power, wealth, physical health, family, or honor as the true sense of happiness. They are all subject to the workings of fortune and are only granted as a kind of temporary loans to the individual. The very nature of (good) fortune is its instability, or mutability. All human life is predicated on contingency, that is, the dependence on external factors we are not in control of. Most people are thus victims of deception, not being able to perceive truth. The more we strive to achieve happiness in physical terms, the less we are capable of achieving it. In fact, as Philosophy then underscores, truth exists only in misfortune, whereas good fortune always proves to be deceptive. Most dramatically, we realize who our true friends are only once we experience misfortune. Everything which makes people happy would thus have to be considered in light of its contingency, being given to us as a temporary loan, but not as something we can hold on forever.

Having realized the true nature of fortune, the individual can then turn away from the traditional effort to gain happiness and embrace the one approach which would be the only one which matters, the search for goodness. No one is ever free of this contingency, but Philosophy claims that there is one ultimate source of all goodness, hence happiness, which would be goodness by itself, or the *summum bonum*. Whether we might talk about God in this context, or the original source of all existence, would not matter.

Philosophy instructs Boethius that only this absolute goodness, or complete power, would know what true happiness is because it is independent from all outside sources, free of all external needs, and satisfied by itself. Hence, this goodness is also exempt from the workings of Fortune and exists by and in itself, which means that it represents the ultimate goal of all existence. All beings strive toward the goal of being part of this happiness, even if most do not fully achieve this.

Nevertheless, by drawing on an analogy pertaining to plants and trees, Philosophy illustrates that this endeavor constitutes the drive toward self-fulfillment, hence happiness. All plants follow the own building plan and want to live out their potentiality to the fullest. In other words, they all aim for the best possible living conditions which make the translation of their seeds into full beings, bearing fruit or seeds possible in the first place. No plant would deliberately look for a place where its own growth would be hindered or where it would experience death.

Boethius thus outlines a concept of the instinctual drive toward happiness, which implies the liberation from contingency by way of realizing that Fortune is offering only illusions of worldly happiness, although none of those aspects (honor, wealth, power, etc.)

would truly offer happiness. Once the individual would have realized this deceptive nature of Fortune, or accepted that deception constitutes the basic character of Fortune, would s/he turn toward the goal beyond Fortune, i.e., the material existence, and strive to free him/herself from contingency.

Oddly, Philosophy then goes so far as to claim that there is no real evil in this world because all beings, including humans, strive to achieve the fulfillment of their potentiality, or their being, and this would lead them automatically to happiness. Those, however, who would turn to evilness would be like plants migrating to the dry, dark, and cold spot where no growth is possible. Evil people do exist, of course, but they act only against their own self and thus diminish their hope ever to free themselves from the contingencies of this world. Thus, Philosophy even suggests that Boethius should feel pity with those who perform evil acts because they are so far away from their actual goal and make every effort to cling to the promises of Fortune without understanding that those can only be evanescent and unsteady. The more they rely on their evilness to achieve happiness, the further away they find themselves from their actual goal and thus would have to be pitied: “Since both the good and the evil seek the Good, but the former do secure it while the latter do not at all, it is not a doubtful proposition, is it, that the good are powerful, while those who are evil are incapable” (p. 95; Book IV, prose 2).

Boethius has Philosophy then explain that it is the natural instinct of all beings to strive toward the Good, which means, to move outside of the framework constituted by Fortune. Whereas the good ones achieve that goal by being what their instinct wants them to be, i.e., good, the evil ones deliberately work against their own self and thus really lose their happiness by becoming complete victims of contingency. This means for Philosophy that those ‘evil’ people do not really exist because they operate like those deranged plants that desire inhospitable locations for themselves. This also has the consequence, in philosophical terms, that the righteous enjoy more happiness from suffering than the evil ones from achieving their goals, hurting or depriving others: “the more long-lasting is his wickedness, the more desolate a man is” (p. 105, Book IV, prose 4).

According to Boethius, true happiness is thus easily achievable if the individual accepts his/her own nature and the instinctual desire for the freedom from contingency. The more a person commits evil deeds, the less this goal becomes reachable. This realization should thus change people’s minds about the outcome their lives because they can easily understand how to evaluate and judge the actions they experience, good or bad. The goal of life is open and one-directional, toward the good, hence toward happiness. If one suffers from wickedness, this should not be taken as a form of punishment, but as a sign that one is moving beyond the world of Fortune and into the dimension of true happiness.

Of course, this leaves Boethius deeply baffled, and so us as readers as well, because it seems monstrous that “good people now have adverse things as their lot, now favorable things, while evil people too have now the things they hope for, now the things they detest, as theirs” (p. 116; Book IV, prose 6). Considering the workings of Providence, however, Philosophy counter-argues by emphasizing that evilness is virtually not present because all challenges for the individual help him/her to go beyond the workings of Fortune and to aspire for the true good what is basically enshrined in all beings: “the difficulty is itself opportunity: for the latter, for the prolongation of his glory [the strong person]; for the former [the wise person], for the education of his wisdom. Indeed, it is from this that it is called virtue, the fact that, because it is supported by its own strength, it is not overcome by adversities” (p. 124; Book IV, prose 7). Fortune is, after all, only deceptive by its own nature, and thus cannot be trusted.

Little wonder that Boethius’s lessons and insights reverberated throughout the centuries, and they are, in fact, just as valuable as they were in the entire pre-modern world. Goodness equals happiness, and both equal freedom from contingency, or Fortune, which means that we as individuals can overcome suffering only if we look for the inner force

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within us, the essence (Williams), driving us practically automatically toward the good. This rests beyond the material conditions and proves to be part of the ultimate Good, or God, the *summum bonum*.

Apollonius of Tyre

Since late antiquity, one major narrative, *Apollonius of Tyre*, has exerted tremendous influence throughout the centuries, and it was certainly popular at least until the early seventeenth century. Many translators worked hard to render this famous text into their own vernaculars, and there is no doubt that modern readers continue to respond to it with great enthusiasm, probably because *Apollonius* is predicated on so many archetypal motives, universal themes, and a timeless series of events and adventures. Even though the novel takes place in the eastern Mediterranean, reflecting the dominance of the late ancient Greek and thus Byzantine culture, here we face one of those great classics in world literature (Wilpert, p. 67; not even an entry, however, in Seigneurie, ed., which undermines, to some extent, his claim to cover truly global literature; quantity does not replace [literary] quality, not even in a post-modern political and cultural context). It would not be necessary or even possible here to examine this work in great detail because there are too many different stages, events, strikes of destiny, and figures populating this narrative stage. The purpose of the present discussion is not to explore simply a selection of late antique or medieval works of literature for their own sake. Instead, the challenge is to investigate to what extent the pre-modern voices have a strong place even within the post-modern discourse and how this major work of ancient literature offers relevant perspectives for readers in the post-modern period as well (*Apollonius of Tyre*).

In many ways, *Apollonius* addresses similar concerns as did Boethius in his *Consolatio de philosophiae*, questioning the meaning of fortune, or destiny, probing the way how people cope under extreme duress, and what inner character, nobility of the mind, ethical values, and intelligence contribute to the survival in a world determined by repeated catastrophes. To sketch just minimally what is going on here, *Apollonius* succeeds in solving the riddle posed by King Antiochus with which he had tried to hide his incestuous rape of his daughter and to keep her for himself despite many wooers for her hand. Antiochus, however, denies that *Apollonius* had solved the riddle and has him proscribed. In the meantime, the protagonist rescues a city from famine, departs again, suffers from shipwreck, survives, encounters his future wife and seems to have found happiness finally.

One day, he learns that Antiochus has died and that his kingdom has now fallen to *Apollonius*. The couple then travels by ship to take over that land, but during their voyage she delivers their child and seems to die that process. The coffin with her body is thrown into the water and later washes up the shore of Ephesus, where doctors manage to recover her, which allows the sorrowful woman to assume the role of a priestess. In the meantime, *Apollonius* entrusts his daughter to foster parents, who prove to be evil-minded and later want the young woman, Tarsia, to be killed. Yet, pirates save her, and sell her into prostitution. When *Apollonius* learns that his daughter has passed away, as a tombstone implies, he falls into deep depression and roams the eastern Mediterranean completely despondent, no longer able to give direction to his own life (Rizzo Nervo). Eventually, when his ship harbors in the same city where his daughter is enslaved, she is sent to lighten up the sorrowful man's mind, which she succeeds in achieving by engaging with him in a riddle contest. Both then recognize each other, which subsequently leads to the happy end, *Apollonius* also discovering his wife, presumed to be dead, once again, when he harbors in Ephesus on his return home.

Let us unpack some of the essential ideas formulated here and question how they apply to our own time, whether pre- or post-modern. Apart from the various references to sexual crimes (rape, incest, prostitution), the original author addressed primarily the workings

of destiny, as best expressed by the notion of shipwreck which robs Apollonius of everything he owns and only leaves him with his bare life (Classen, "Storms"; Carmignani, 2014). However, the protagonist commands deep inner qualities and a sense of spiritual nobility which allows him each time when catastrophe strikes to overcome the external threats and to recover worldly esteem and joy. He only loses all hope when he is convinced that his daughter has died, as the epitaph indicates. In his address to the sailors, the protagonist spells out clearly what his own psychological condition has turned into: "I want to breathe my last at sea, since I have not been allowed to see light on land" (p. 157).

Apollonius has died, metaphorically speaking, and he recovers his senses and his trust in life only when his own daughter triggers his intellect by means of the riddles and then when she retells her own story of suffering. Empathy awakens the sense of humanity in the protagonist, so his 'mindwork' is jolted back into action, which in turn makes it possible for him to liberate his daughter from slavery and the threat of prostitution. Granted, by means of her moving account about her personal suffering she had convinced all potential customers to abstain from using her sexual body for their own purposes and to shower her with much gold. But only the joint effort by father and daughter overcomes the tragic condition and liberates each one from the near-death situation. This then quickly moves to the next scene in which Apollonius retells his own life story to the priestess in Ephesus who thus can reveal that she is his own wife.

Several critical functions thus emerge here that deeply matter for people throughout the ages in coping with their existential challenges. First, there is the individual intellect and hence the ability to decipher codes, signals, words, images, and also objects and thus to understand the true workings of this world. The young medical doctor in Ephesus demonstrates the same mental sophistication as Apollonius and can thus rescue the poor woman from her coma because he recognizes the faint signs of life in her body and so prevents her burial while being still alive. The novel thus underscores one of the central tasks of all beings, to cope within their environment, to read the signs coming forth all the time, and to read them properly in order to operate successfully in this life (Wolff, 1999; Wolff, 2000).

The other major component proves to be the protagonist's empathy with people's suffering, such as when he ends the famine in the city of Tarsus. The medical doctor in Ephesus demonstrates the same character when he takes care of the female corpse and can revive it. Surprisingly, all the potential customers who hear the prostitute Tarsia's story quickly display the same emotional response and spare her out of pity for this tragic figure. Later, once Apollonius has arrived in the same city where his daughter is kept as a sex slave, Mitylene, the local lord, Athenagoras, displays also empathy, not only for the beautiful prostitute, Tarsia, but then also for the miserable man who hides in the hull of his ship, and he sends her to offer the stranger some consolation.

Throughout the entire novel, destiny strikes the protagonist over and over again, and he would have almost succumbed to it and passed away if he had not received this decisive help from his own daughter. Once the secret of her identity has been revealed, happiness returns immediately, with Apollonius recovering his own daughter, who then marries Athenagoras, and discovering his long-lost wife serving as the priestess for Diana. Both here and in Mitylene, but also in previous scenes, retelling one's life-story provides a catalyst for human responses of a deep kind, with the listeners embracing the teller as a victim of destiny and providing him with all the sustenance he or she needs, both emotionally and materially. Narration thus emerges as the critical tool in all of human existence through which the basic bonds of communication, community, compassion, and cooperation are established.

Moreover, as the global framework of this text indicates, our lives here on earth are contingent, just as Boethius also outlined it in his treatise although he did not include any references to this literary work. True happiness does not rest at all in the material conditions, whereas it can be found in the spiritual, immaterial dimension. Boethius regained his strength

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and confidence through an extensive philosophical reflection and a lengthy learning process, using the allegorical figure of Philosophy. In *Apollonius*, the protagonist suffers from a series of severe blows from destiny, being proscribed, suffering from shipwreck, losing his wife due to the childbirth, then losing his daughter to death, as he believes, and then falling into deep depression which makes him virtually suicidal. While no allegory appears to rescue him, as in Boethius's treatise, it is his own daughter who confronts him with many riddles and can thus remind him of the power of the human intellect and the need to accept the human collective as the essential framework for a happy life. Help is always needed, no one can exist all by him/herself alone. Apollonius rescues the citizens of Tarsus from Famine, and other people help him recovering from his shipwreck. Ultimately, his own daughter serves as the most critical supporter, which then makes it possible for the entire family to reunify, and this time with Tarsia already married.

In the face of tragedy, the individual's inner strength is called upon – this is impressively similar to the ethical message contained in the prologue to Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210) – but even the protagonist is in severe danger of failing in that regard because he must assume that both his wife and his daughter have died. Apollonius's lengthy travels via ship without any specific goals underscore the extent to which he is losing any meaning of life, first after his wife's 'death,' and fourteen years later that of his daughter. Deception rules his entire existence, first when King Antiochus claims that Apollonius had not solved the riddle, which creates chaos in his life. Later, having married, he loses his wife following the childbirth, but she is not really dead. Subsequently, his last hope for a good future is crushed when he is told that his daughter Tarsia has died just three days before his arrival in Tarsia. At the same time, Apollonius also knows how to solve riddles correctly, both in the first scene and later in the hull of the ship when his daughter entertains him with riddles and thus brings him back to life. And, to repeat our previous observation, in Ephesus only the young doctor can detect the signs of life in the body of Apollonius's wife and thus to bring her back to health.

Tarsia proves to be the most powerful storyteller, since her own life story moves all of her customers to tears and then also manages to awaken a sense of meaning in her father's mind. All those who deceive, by contrast, or tell lies, such as King Antiochus and Tarsia's foster mother Dionysias, die by God's will or suffer a violent death, just as the pimp who had kept Tarsia as his slave. The novel thus offers numerous messages of universal significance which can have a deep impact on us as well who live in post-modernity. We continue to be subject to destiny and know only too well the consequences of tragedy, which can strike anyone at any time. Apollonius proves to be, just as his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law, highly ethical and virtuous individuals and only thereby succeed in regaining their happiness. Contingency is fully at play in this novel, and the protagonists must accept many blows to their lives before they can overcome evil, are graced by God with new happiness, but then lose that again.

However, despite all the instability and constant experience of tragedy, there is hope and a strong sense of meaning because the outcome proves to be fulfilling and happy. Despite the constant experience of misfortune, ultimately, just as in Boethius's treatise, the noble individual, determined by ethical values, ideals, and a high intellect, can withstand these strikes of destiny and find a safe haven at the end after all. Granted, Apollonius would have almost failed, but with the help of his daughter he can recover his senses, regain the idea of meaning of life, and retrieve his happiness, together with his by the expanded family (Salvador-Bello).

As scholarship has richly demonstrated, there are, of course, many other levels of meaning, considering the religious, sexual, criminal, political, and economic dimensions. However, for our purposes, there is no doubt that *Apollonius of Tyre* carries universal

meaning and addresses, fundamentally, central concerns of our day and age. The polarity between pre- and post-modern thereby appears somewhat artificial because the essential questions all people have to address sometime in their lives remain the same and challenge us over and over again. This ancient Greek novel refreshingly transgresses all historical boundaries and proves to be relevant for its medieval and post-modern readers because human suffering and the quest for human happiness never come to a complete end.

Fable Poets: Marie de France and Ulrich Bonerius

It might be almost impossible to find anyone in the world today who would not be familiar to some extent with the universal literary genre of fables, which have always appealed to young and old in all cultures throughout time. It has always been a highly attractive strategy by poets to use animals as figures in their poems or narratives in order to reflect on conditions of and situations in human life. The presentation of animals makes it possible to attack vices, moral and ethical shortcomings, to ridicule stupidity and foolishness, and to criticize wrong behavior and committing one of the seven deadly sins (Rubin, 1993; Blackham, 1965; Coenen, 2000; Schmalzgruber, 2020). As ancient as fables prove to be (Aesop, 6th c. B.C.E.; Phaedrus, 1st c. C.E.; Babrius, 2nd c. C.E.; Aphthonius of Antioch, ca. 315; and Avianus, early 5th c.), here not even taking into account the rich fable traditions in China, India, Africa, and many other parts of the world, they have never lost anything in their validity, and this also in the post-modern world. Two of the most outstanding fable authors during the high and late Middle Ages were Marie de France (ca. 1170–ca.1200) and Ulrich Bonerius (ca. 1320–ca. 1350). Both drew extensively from their ancient sources, but both also developed their own tales, sometimes leaving out animals altogether and addressing critical issues in society.

Marie included 103 fables in her collection, which are framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The Swiss-German Dominican priest Bonerius developed exactly 100 fables and used the same framework, although it seems highly unlikely that he might have been familiar with the work of his Anglo-Norman predecessor. Since both used some of the same sources, there is a considerable overlap in their accounts, but in the end these two works differ extensively after all. It would not be possible here to offer an extensive discussion of these fables, which have already been, of course, the object of intensive research (for Marie, see, e.g., Bloch, 2003; for Bonerius, see, e.g., Grubmüller, 1977; Wright, 2001). Medieval scholarship has certainly acknowledged both poets as outstanding masters in this literary genre. To what extent, however, would their comments and insights contribute to the post-modern discourse, especially to the universal quest for meaning and identity, values and virtues, truth and happiness? The following reflections can only be attempts at building significant bridges between both cultural-historical periods, but I suggest that those past voices carry much more value for the current endeavors to make sense out of our world than most post-modern literary scholars might have realized.

Both Marie and Bonerius begin with the famous fable of the cock which discovers a gemstone in a dungpile but quickly dismisses it because it does not provide it any food. Marie only comments: “What for the cock and gem is true / We’ve seen with men and women too: / They neither good nor honour prize; / The worst they seize; the best, despise” (vv. 19–22). In the German version, the poet offers considerably more remarks, equating the cock with all those fools here on earth who do not understand how to appreciate wisdom, the arts, honor, and goods (v. 28). People’s true task would not be just to look for food or material riches, but to learn, to study, to acquire wisdom, and to grow both intellectually and spiritually. Fools, by contrast would indulge only in the physical pleasures of this world (v. 35) and would not be able to understand the teachings contained in the fables, as they follow subsequently, i.e., the gemstone, which is also the title for Bonerius’s collection: “gesehendesint die narrenblind” (v. 41; with open eyes the fools are blind).

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Marie often emphasizes the danger which awaits people who are subject to the rule of the mighty and powerful, and severely criticizes her aristocratic contemporaries, such as in the fable of the wolf and the lamb (no. 2; in Bonerius, no. 5). Both animals, each representing a social class, are drinking from a river, when the wolf accuses the innocent lamb of soiling the water. Although the latter defends itself, it has no chance against this voracious enemy and is quickly killed. For Marie, this serves to illustrate how the nobles take the ordinary folks to court and “strip them clean of flesh and skin” (v. 37), badly abusing their position within society, committing murder and demonstrating utter corruption. For Bonerius, the fable targets more specifically those who are culprits of arrogance (v. 38) and guilty of causing grave harm to people below them, destroying their farms and taking their lives without any justification (vv. 45–48).

The next fable, shared by both poets as well, illustrates the consequences of disloyalty and betrayal as demonstrated by a frog against a mouse. While in Marie's version, the mouse luckily survives when a kite notices their struggle in the water, in Bonerius's version, both animals are devoured by a harrier. There are many other animal stories mirroring wrong human behavior, i.e., vice in its myriad manifestation, whether arrogance, pride, foolishness, greed, lust, lack of thankfulness, disloyalty, revenge, mockery, evil advice, vanity, ignorance, stupidity, bribery, distrust, fear, disrespect, unsteadiness, lack of precaution, pretense, falsity, and so forth. Marie certainly intended to expose character flaws among the members of her aristocratic society, especially at the royal court of King Henri II. Bonerius addressed a broad audience and targeted both women and men, old people and children, but both poets transformed their narratives into powerful literary expressions of the dangers of ethical shortcomings, moral failures, and generally sinful behavior.

Both poets also offered significant insights into the individual desire for freedom, and this already in the Middle Ages. In Marie's version of the wolf and the dog (no. 26), the wolf at first is greatly attracted to the luxurious lifestyle which the dog can enjoy, being well fed by its master. But then the wolf realizes that the dog is completely dependent and not free, forced to do every bidding by its master, which would be intolerable for the wolf: “I'll never choose to wear a chain! / I'd rather live as a wolf, free, / Than on a chain in luxury. / I still can make a choice, and so / You fare to town; to woods I'll go” (vv. 36-40). Marie, however, does not go much further into details and only concludes that the wolf's observation cut all bonds between both animals.

Bonerius proves to be greatly interested in the theme of freedom and has a good handful of fables in which he addresses this critical topic, so important especially for the citizens of late medieval Swiss cities. His fable also concludes with rather curt comments, with the wolf rejecting the life in servitude in favor of a life in freedom. But then Bonerius adds his own comments, indicating that a poor man who can exert his free will would be much richer than a rich man without that privilege (vv. 63-65). Freedom would be the crown of one's life (v. 71) and would make one's existence most pleasant and honorable (vv. 72-73). By way of freedom people gain honor and spiritual nobility: “vr̄heitist der êrenhort” (v. 75; freedom is the treasure of honor). No physical wealth could match individual freedom, and the former would ultimately be – this might well be an echo of Boethius's teaching in his *Consolatio de philosophiae* – only the source of sorrow and laments (vv. 80-82).

Less a fable but more a philosophical teaching, in the last narrative (no. 100), Bonerius offers the additional lesson that those who keep their own mortality in mind would lead a better life, with more meaning and deeper happiness. A worthy cleric – perhaps a direct allusion to the poet himself – sells wisdom on the market, and this at a high price. The king orders his servants to buy some from that man, who only writes down one sentence, ‘keep your end in mind, consider your deeds, and what might happen with you in the future’ (vv. 35-37). Although the servants grumble about the foolishness of this purchase, the king

has the sentence inscribed above his doorway, which ultimately saves his life. A group of courtiers is plotting to get him assassinated and so hires a barber to decapitate the king while he is shaving him. But the barber, reading the epitaph before he enters the king's private chamber, becomes deeply frightened, trembles, and displays such suspicious behavior that he is apprehended, forced to reveal the reason, and possibly executed – we are not told what the verdict was. The poet then concludes that those who are conscious about their mortality would be wise (vv. 89–90) because the daily struggle would not be the purpose of life, but the outcome of one's full existence (v. 93). The text concludes with the analogy of a ship captain who manages to steer the ship safely into the harbor, which represents people's lives. And Bonerius comments finally: 'He who considers his death will rarely experience suffering' (vv. 101-02). Marie's last fable (no. 103) relates of a woman who urges her chicken to stop scratching the soil for food because she would like to offer her a basket filled with grain. The hen, however, rejects this offer because it would not change anything in her own nature, the desire to scratch and to search for worms. For the poet, this simply means that even if people gain great wealth, they would not change in their character or customs (vv. 24-26).

Can Medieval Literature Speak to the Post-Modern?

There might be some resistance to accept those past voices within the post-modern discourse. However, the case studies that I have presented are all based on philosophical, literary, and ethical reflections by authors/poets whose narratives exerted tremendous influence far into the modern/post-modern age. Boethius, above all, was the greatest philosopher throughout the ages, and his messages have not lost any value for us today; if we do not need them even more so than ever before (Classen, "What do they mean for us today"; Classen, "Boethius and No End in Sight"). *Apollonius of Tyre* can be identified as a true 'bestseller' from the third to the seventeenth century, and it continues to appeal to modern readers, as all my students from decades of teaching have amply confirmed. Marie de France's fables have survived in twenty-three manuscripts from mid-thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries (Marie de France, trans. Spiegel, p. 13). Bonerius's fables were even more popular, being extant in thirty-six manuscripts in two incunabula from 1461, and they were rediscovered already in the early eighteenth century and deeply influenced Enlightenment writers and philologists ever since.

Apart from those historical data, the ideas contained in all these works – there would be many other examples from the pre-modern world – directly speak to us and help us today to steer through a complicated, often almost paradoxical, perhaps even meaningless world. We could also claim that post-modernity is characterized by a deep sense of disorientation, fragmentation, and splintering of universal concepts and values. This does not mean that these medieval voices could be translated one by one to the crucial spokesperson for us today, but they certainly provide insights into fundamental values, ideals, concerns, and particularly into troubles that vex human existence, maybe now more than ever before.

These pre-modern writers provide significant observations and direction and should thus be part of the post-modern discourse. To use an analogy, the best computer technology would be useless if we did not know how to type on the keyboard. The future might replace the typing, of course, with speech commands, but we then still would know how to speak, how to formulate our ideas precisely, to communicate, and to interact with our fellow human beings. Boethius, the anonymous author of *Apollonius of Tyre*, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius are, so to speak, the keys on our keyboard and allow us to operate effectively and meaningfully in the pre-modern world because their messages, insights, ideas, concepts, values, and principles address specifically the fundamental concerns of all human existence, both past and present. Consequently, reading those pre-modern writers, among many others, of course, creates a new angle through which we in the post-modern period are suddenly empowered to retrieve our roots and learn about the essence of our human nature.

As Paul William formulated: "Your power is a manifestation of your essence" (94), "Your greatest power is love" (95), and: "You are not alone" (96). To this we could and

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should add the many medieval voices addressing the same question, what constitutes the human essence. Boethius knew it, the author of *Apollonius* and his many translators and adaptors knew it, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius knew it as well. Post-modernity can thus gain tremendously by turning its attention not only toward the future, but also toward the past.

Good trees grow, to return to our previous analogy, in deep and rich soil, but they die, if they lose the contact with the ground or are deprived from the nutrients in the earth. Interestingly, the very same question, how to find happiness in post-modern life, also greatly concerns the world of economy, labor, and management, though the historical-literary sources introduced here do not yet play any significant role in that post-modern discourse (Kernbach and Eppler, 2020; cf. also Topping, 2020). Future synergies promise to produce new avenues, perspectives, and insights drawn from the past for the present, which makes big room for the Humanities at the table of post-modern discourse. We face, after all, universal wisdom in these late antique and medieval narratives, wisdom which we need today perhaps more than ever in a world determined by a chaotic, disjointed, irrational, frantic, and disoriented post-modernity.

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Bio-note

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